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Participatory modelling in North Omo, Ethiopia: Investigating the perceptions of different groups through models

Ejigu Jonfa, Haile Mariam Tebeje, Tadesse Dessalegn, Hailu Halala and Andrea Cornwall

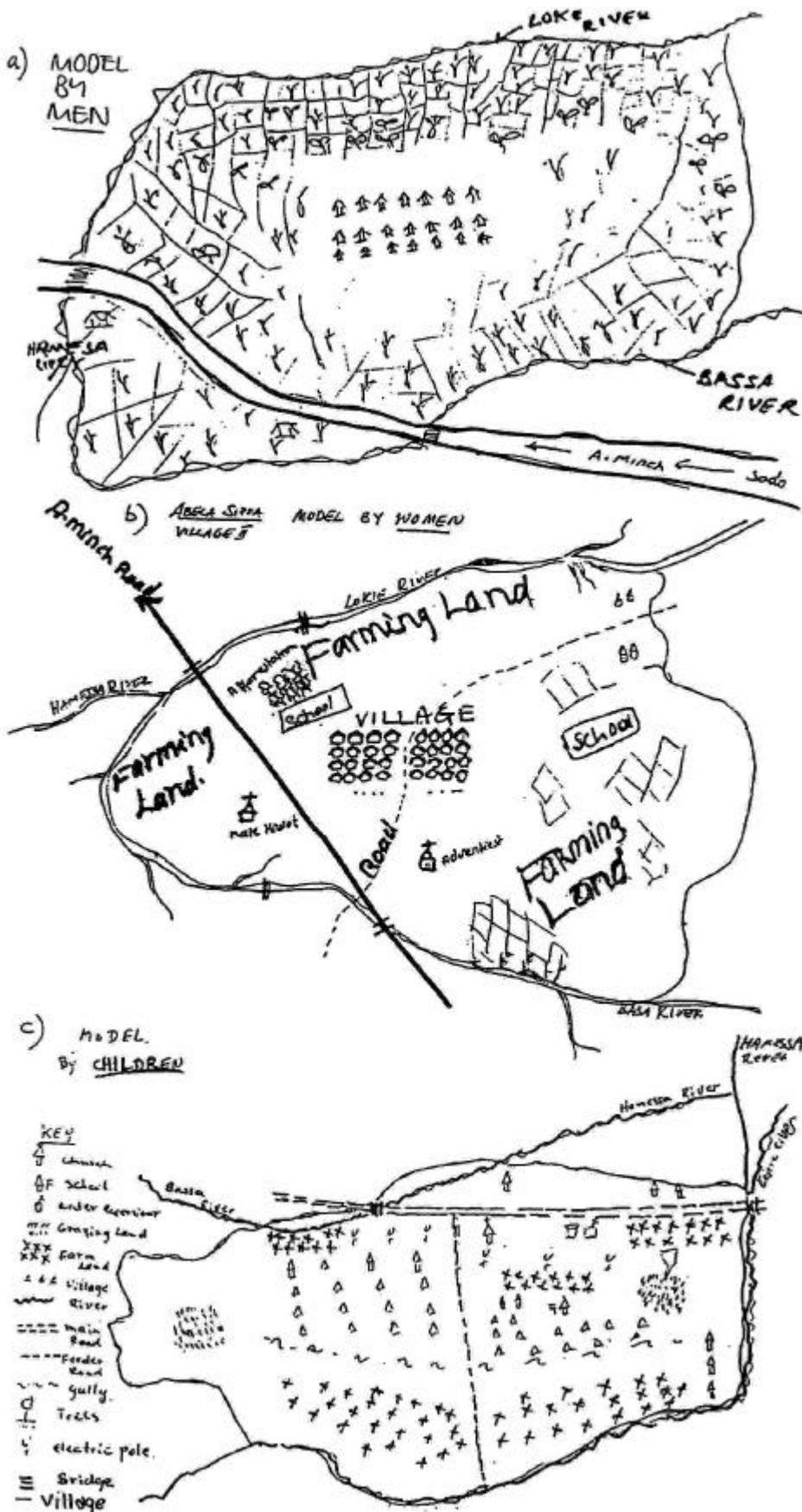
Participatory modelling in RRA is based on the idea that when a group come together to create a model of their area, the representation that emerges can serve as an indication of the aspects of the area which are of importance to the people who live there. Yet 'participation' often means, in practice, that the finished product tends to reflect the picture that the dominant group wish to portray. A 'group of villagers' may include old and young, men, women and children, but how successfully can the creation of one model convey the concerns of these different groups? This question was asked by a PRA team in North Omo on a training course in August 1991.

When the team gathered together villagers to make a model of the area, they found that although about thirty people clustered round in interest, only a handful of those present were participating in defining the features to be represented. This handful were all adult and male. Women silently looked on, children were shooed away if they got too near or tried to join in. The model reflected the perceptions of a particular group as to what they defined as the appropriate features and issues to show the PRA team. This did not seem adequate to understand the problems people faced in this area. The 'people' were also female and non-adult and their respective interests and concerns were not being given a voice.

The team asked the women and children to make their own models on spaces of ground adjacent to the area used by the men. The children quickly gathered sticks, leaves and stones and, under the direction of a ten year old boy, built an extensive model, which included features which the men had left out and, more relevantly, had excluded from their model. For example, the men's model showed the whole area as a patchwork of farm lands and discussions centred on the lack of grazing land. The children drew in grazing areas, unaware of the agendas of their elders. The group later found that every farmer allocates part of his land to grazing and makes use of communal grazing areas.

The women gathered many branches and twigs in order to create a detailed model of the rivers, their tributaries, crossing points and ponds which were made by the rivers. The issue of water availability, which the men had not brought up, became an apparent concern. The women also detailed the village and marked out the exact number of houses, discussing the number of inhabitants and the spaces between the houses, which led onto discussions about social issues. Both the women and children showed forested areas and an afforestation scheme, while the men had given over the whole model to marking out farmland and complained of a lack of afforestation.

Figure 1. Participatory modelling by gender and age, North Omo, Ethiopia



Modelling does not merely reveal people's perceptions, it also provides an opportunity of people to show a group of outsiders a version of their area which begs certain emphases and areas for intervention. When a group of researchers arrives in a village, whether on foot or in a land cruiser, villagers expect them to be capable of offering assistance of some form no matter how the exercise is introduced. In this situation, the men, in particular, wished to prompt certain conclusions and make certain points. Children, on the other hand, had none of the expectations or political insight of their elders and wished just to show an accurate version of their area. If significantly different versions emerge the team would be better placed to reflect on the implications of the motivated representations which are being offered. Through this a greater awareness of the politics of the encounter could be developed, as well as an understanding of what is tacitly expected of the team in terms of assistance.

The PRA team learnt from this how useful it was to do the modelling exercise with different groups. As men often dominate group proceedings and present their versions as authoritative, dividing a modelling group by age and gender is an effective way to gain an insight into the perceptions and pressing concerns of focus groups. It was also important that the PRA team, which (apart from the trainer) was composed exclusively of men, were guided towards considering the viewpoints of women and children; who are too often disregarded as informants. The issues brought up by women and children would have been submerged if only one model had been created. By letting them build their own models a wealth of interesting information could be gained, both through the exercise itself and through the contrasts between the models.

- **Ejigu Jonfa**, FARM Africa, PO Box 5746, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; **Haile Mariam Tebeje**, WVE, PO Box 174, Wolayta, Soddo, Ethiopia; **Tadesse Dessalegn**, I.A.R., PO Box 6 Awassa, Ethiopia; **Hailu Halala**, MoA, PO Box 166, Wolayta, Soddo, Ethiopia; and **Andrea Cornwall**, School of Oriental and African Studies, Malet Street, London WC1 and IIED, London, UK.

NOTE

The report of the training workshop held in North Omo in August, 1991, entitled "Farmer Participatory Research in North Omo, Ethiopia: Report of a Training Course in Rapid Rural Appraisal", is available from IIED, London, free of charge to individuals and institutions in the south. The cost is £5 to those in the north.